

Transformation and the Parousia

Donald Guthrie

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INTRODUCTION

No-one can deny the importance of the theme of immortality.¹ It has a universal relevance since everyone is mortal. But there is a strange paradox about the subject of the after-life. It is shrouded in mystery which in other cases would arouse the instinct of curiosity to extensive discussion, yet it is of such a nature that most people prefer to avoid thinking about it altogether. It is clear that there is widespread fear of death (Hebrew 2:15), but no great desire to bring that fear out into the open in order to find ways of dispelling it. It was presumably with a view to encouraging this that the Drew lecture was inaugurated. When the subject is approached from a Christian point of view with the determination to discover what the New Testament actually teaches, the result can be a theme of great inspiration. The aim of the present lecture will be to examine the contribution which a belief in the parousia makes to an understanding of the after-life.

It will be clear from our title that the particular aspect of New Testament teaching which has been selected is that of transformation, and this will have a special bearing on our understanding of the after-life. We shall proceed with our examination in four sections. We shall first consider the general idea of transformation and its theological importance. We shall then comment on the certainty and significance of the parousia as the consummation of history. This will lead us into the subject of the necessity for change in the light of the parousia. Finally we shall attempt to define as far as possible the nature of the transformation to which all Christians can look forward.

THE IDEA OF TRANSFORMATION

It will be well for us to begin by defining in what sense we are using the term transformation. In the context of the after-life, we are using the term to denote a radical change which nevertheless preserves sufficient continuity to ensure that there is no disintegration of personality. A change which was so radical that continuity was destroyed would cease to be transformation and would fall into the category of complete re-creation. Our concern will be to discover the New Testament view of life which follows death. Our investigation of the general idea of transformation will take into account the Old Testament position, the intertestamental period,

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the transfiguration of Jesus, and the teaching of the apostles, particularly that of Paul.

1. Transformation in the Old Testament

It must be admitted that the Old Testament is sparse in its details about the after-life and especially on the subject of change. Indeed many scholars would consider that the only certain statement on this theme is in Daniel 12:2—'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.'

¹ This article consists of the 1982 Drew Lecture on immortality. The editor is indebted to the trustees for permission to print it in this journal.

There is here some indication of radical change from dust to life or contempt, but no details are given about what the awaking involves.² There are, however, some other Old Testament hints. Isaiah 26:19—'Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy'—has a similar expectation to Daniel 12, with the added reference to resurrection bodies.³ Job 19:25-27, while less explicit, supports some form of after-life.⁴

Some reference must be made to Sheol, the shadowy place for departed spirits. There is some dispute about whether Sheol is the abode of both righteous and unrighteous or whether only of the latter. It is a state of separation from God and cannot legitimately be termed 'life'. A transition from human existence to shadowy semi-existence is not to be classed as transformation and supplies nothing to our present theme, except the negation of it.

2. The intertestamental period

Although there was a developing awareness of life after death in the intertestamental period, there was no common doctrine. There is evidence for both the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul apart from the resurrection of the body, and for the idea of the survival of the whole person including the resurrection of the body.⁵ Sometimes both ideas occur in the same work. There is no apparent awareness of the problem raised and no specific attempt to reconcile the two views. The various indications of a kind of intermediate state, based on the doctrine of Sheol, are sporadic attempts to reach some kind of harmonization.

Nevertheless there was some idea of transformation. As H. C. C. Cavallin remarks, 'Throughout the sources we find suggestions about the heavenly, transcendent, glorified and spiritual state of the righteous in the new life after death.'⁶ It is clear that some anticipation of some meaningful change was developing and this Jewish background must be borne in mind in our approach to the New Testament teaching.

It should be noted that some differences of emphasis can be found between Palestinian and Greek Diaspora texts. In the former there is no support for the Greek notion of immortality. In the latter there is strong evidence of the infiltration of Greek ideas into Jewish circles. Nevertheless the parallel expressions of the resurrection of the body in these Diaspora

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² The interpretation of the 'many' here has been the subject of frequent debate. B. J. Alfrink, 'L'idee de resurrection', *Biblica* 40 (1959) 362-371, maintains that only faithful Jews are here in mind. Cf. also A. A. Di Lella, in L. F. Hartmann and A. A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (Anchor Bible, New York, 1978) 308-309. J. J. Collins, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death', *CBQ* 36 (1974) 33-35, considers that Daniel 12:3 has in mind the elevation of the righteous to the ranks of the angels.

³ There are differences of opinion over the application of Isaiah 26:19. R. Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life* (Edinburgh 1960) 137, concludes that the dead are members of the chosen people, possibly 'martyrs'. He does not think that the idea of resurrection here is novel. R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (London 1980) 216, favours the view of Fohrer and Wildberger that the 'dead' are the Jewish community whose rebirth is foreseen here; cf. also J. F. A. Sawyer, *VT* 23 (1973) 218-234.

⁴ F. I. Anderson, *Job* (London 1976) 194, strongly argues that Job was expecting vindication after death rather than in this life. The Jewish writer, R. Gordis, *The Book of Job* (New York 1978) 204-205, denies that this is a reference to bodily resurrection, but agrees that it affirms the assurance of future vindication.

E. J. Kissane, *The Book of Job* (Dublin 1939) 121, takes v.26 as conditional, which means that Job did not affirm specifically that he would see God. The wide variation in the interpretation of this verse shows the difficulty in arriving at a conclusive statement.

⁵ Although H. C. C. Cavallin, *Life after Death* (Lund 1974), is particularly concerned with Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15, he supplies a valuable survey of Jewish opinions on the after-life covering the OT texts, the Palestinian apocalyptic texts, the Diaspora texts and the early Rabbinic traditions.

⁶ Cavallin, *Life after Death* 200.

texts is evidence that the Jewish mind did not easily dispense with the body in thinking about the future life.

By New Testament times, it is known that the Pharisees were strong on the resurrection of the body, whereas the Sadducees denied this view. The subject itself was clearly a contemporary theme of debate in the Jewish world of the first century and this explains the Sadducean attempt to trap Jesus (Matthew 22:23-33). They were silenced by his refusal to endorse any kind of material or physical continuation into the after-life. Clearly the Sadducees' question was on the assumption that little, if any, transformation would take place at death.

3. The transfiguration of Jesus

It may at first seem irrelevant to include an examination of the transfiguration in a discussion of the after-life, but the justification for doing so is that a remarkable transformation happened to a living person and this has considerable relevance for the transformation of those who will still be alive at the parousia. Certain details have special interest for our theme. Both Mark and Matthew state that Jesus was transfigured before the disciples. The verb used is *metamorphoō*, which involves a change of form and not just a change of appearance.⁷ The impression created on the minds of the onlookers focused on the intense whiteness of the garments (Mark, Matthew and Luke) and on the facial expression (Matthew likened it to the sun and Luke noted the change of his countenance). Further, Luke mentions that the two men who were seen with him, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glory, but no description is given of them. This incident was obviously recognized as being highly significant to be included in all of the Synoptic gospels. It is also mentioned in 2 Peter 1.

It is not our present purpose to discuss the transfiguration in detail, but by any standards it furnishes the most remarkable example of the transformation of a living person, all the more remarkable because the person concerned was the incarnate Son of God. Our first question concerns the purpose of the event. If it was a demonstration of glory, it is strange that it was restricted to three spectators. But such a demonstration of glory would undoubtedly have been misunderstood or misconstrued by most people. Even the inner circle of disciples were utterly baffled. The Synoptic records do not suggest that this was no more than a vision—it was a definite and instantaneous, although admittedly transitory, happening. If it is, therefore, an actual physical event, it provides a pointer to the form of the living at the parousia. This was no gradual change, but instantaneous transformation which could be seen by the onlookers. If there is a link between the transformation and the parousia, we may deduce that an immediate change is seen as appropriate to a glorified setting. It is assumed that Moses and Elijah appeared in some kind of glorified, though recognizable, body.

It is to be noted that the verb *metamorphoō* is used in a rather different

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⁷ G. H. Boobyer, *St. Mark and the Transfiguration Story* (Edinburgh 1942) 6ff. criticizes the view that Mark saw the transfiguration as a prophecy of resurrection and exaltation. He considers that the gospel writers did not see the resurrection body of Jesus as a *doxa* body as in the transfiguration. We may reject the view that the transfiguration is a misplaced resurrection account (cf. C. E. Carlston, 'Transfiguration and Resurrection', *JBL* 80 (1961) 233-240). There is no reason to reject this as a historic event, as W. L. Lane *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids 1974) 316-317, points out, in which case it can serve as a pattern for the parousia 'body'. H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (London 1976) 223, regards Mark's story as extensively overlaid by the Church with apocalyptic symbols.

sense in Romans 12:2, in which occurrence it refers to a change in the use of the mind. But in 2 Corinthians 3:18, the only other New Testament occurrence of the word, it refers to a change in believers and this usage will be commented on later.

Insufficient attention has generally been given to the connection between the transfiguration and the parousia, but there can be little doubt of its relevance for our understanding of Christ's resurrection body and therefore of the resurrection of believers. It is noticeable in the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus that both recognition and failure to recognize occur, but this may be attributable to the adaptations necessary for communication with those still in the form of the flesh. The common factor is that both the transfigured Jesus and the resurrected Christ are in a changed state from the human body of Jesus. Even the nail prints of the risen Christ, although a valuable means of communication, do not require too close an identification with the actual human body of Jesus. It was certainly a glorified body which bore the identification marks of the physical body of Jesus.

4. Transformation in New Testament thought

It is instructive to consider the importance of change and newness in New Testament teaching. Our quest here is largely confined to Paul, but not exclusively so. Certainly when Paul contemplates the believer's destiny, he sees at once the significance of the transformation. His doctrine of predestination is keyed to it (Romans 8:29).⁸ Paul is not talking about predestination to election, but to conformity to the image of God's son. In spite of Genesis 1:29, Paul does not suppose that believers have already passed through this transformation. Between the original form of man in God's image and the promised change for believers into the image of God's sons lies the whole-history of fallen mankind. God's purpose could be secured only through radical change.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which a process of transformation is already taking place in believers. The renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2) is certainly a present reality in an ongoing process.⁹ The present tense in 2 Corinthians 3:18 is also significant since Paul affirms that we are being transformed into Christ's likeness.¹⁰ As so often in New Testament thought, the present merges into the future and the 'now' has to be balanced with the 'not yet'. But at least we may say that if God has set in motion a process of transformation in this life, it is an indication of his intention to bring it to completion. Paul speaks of adding one degree of glory to another and this becomes fully intelligible only in the light of what he says elsewhere about the resurrection body.

The eschatological expectation of radical change is seen in the New Testament view of the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21, 22).¹¹ No change in the cosmic

⁸ With reference to Romans 8:29, although the transformation may here include the idea of sanctification (so C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh 1975) 432), yet there is no denying that the major reference is to future transformation.

⁹ As C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London 1957) 233, points out, 'the renewal which is begun in conversion and baptism and advanced with every Christian decision taken ends in the glory of God'. The element of real change should not, however, be overlooked. A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London 1949) 54, insists that the change is in real being, based on the significance of the *morphe* root in the compound verb.

¹⁰ P. E. Hughes, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids 1962) 118, brings out the force of the present tense linked with the idea of the restoration of the image of God which is the end of the process.

¹¹ The view in 2 Peter must be clearly differentiated from the Stoic idea of the periodic destruction and rebirth of the world. There is a finality about Peter's view which suggests a new world of a totally different quality. Cf. E. M. B. Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (London 1968) 131-132. The transformation idea is clear when the New Jerusalem is compared with the old city, although the comparison in the context is with the harlot city

order could be more radical than the dissolution of the existing earth and heavens. The transforma-

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tion, as far as the community of God's people are concerned, is vividly portrayed in the vision of the New Jerusalem. In view of this it is not surprising that transformation is equally, if not more, important in the case of individual destiny.

In the light of these brief observations on the central significance of change in God's plan for fallen mankind, we can summarize the position in the following way. Transformation from an existing state is seen to be an integral part of God's plan. Therefore, in order to conform to that plan, both man and the creation as a whole are destined for change since man's fallen state has rendered his present condition inappropriate. This point is to be enlarged on in a later section. The fact that Jesus is seen to be the believer's pattern for change will make a significant contribution to our discussion of the nature of transformation in our last section. Since the transformation is so vital in God's plan, death cannot be the last event. It is essential for it to be overcome.

THE CERTAINTY OF THE PAROUSIA

There is only one event that can break the universal cycle of death leading to death. The statement that all men die is not absolute. It needs one important qualification, i.e. that all men will die except those who survive until the parousia. That glorious event, which will draw this present age to a close, will mean that some will escape death. The only previous examples of this were Enoch and Elijah in the Old Testament, who were both said to have been taken up to God. Nevertheless it is because a definite change from the existing state is essential that those who escape death must in the nature of the case be at once transformed. Never do the fate of the dead and fate of the living come together in such a dramatic way as in the New Testament indications of the coming parousia.

Space forbids any more than the briefest indication of the absolute certainty of the parousia. It will suffice to point out the following features. 1. Jesus undoubtedly taught his disciples about the parousia. Many of the Son of Man sayings focus on a future coming (e.g. Mark 13:26; 14:62). 2. Paul is specially clear about the parousia. He mentions it in many of his letters, beginning with those to the Thessalonians. Some scholars have questioned the value of Paul's evidence because it is affirmed that he changed his mind. While it may be conceded that in his later epistles he is less certain that he will be alive at the parousia, he is no less certain of the reality of the coming event. He has other terms to describe this apart from the parousia. Sometimes¹² he speaks of the appearance (*epiphaneia*) and at other times of the manifestation or revelation (*apokalypsis*). In no case is there any suggestion that he is not referring to a future event. Indeed, the three passages with which we shall be dealing take it for granted. The problems of transformation with which Paul is concerned would otherwise make no sense.

symbolically called 'Babylon'. This applies whether or not the New Jerusalem is intended to be regarded as a city. M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London 1940) 415, is probably right in interpreting the city as symbolic of the ideal community of people. In this case personal transformation is implied.

¹² On Paul's terms for the *parousia*, cf. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester 1981) 803-804. For general discussions on the second coming of Christ, cf. A. L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament* (Leiden 1966); J. A. T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming* (London 1957); T. F. Glasson, *The Second Advent* (London 1963).

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Some comment must be made on the view that the real New Testament teaching on eschatology is that it has already been realized, based mainly on the evidence of John's gospel. This view, although it has received strong support, cannot deal adequately with all the New Testament evidence and must for that reason be rejected.¹³ The only form of it which is acceptable is that which regards it as in process of being realized. Even this is valid only if provision is made within it for a culminating event in the future. If the idea of a future coming is dispensed with it would leave unanswered the fundamental question of the consummation of history and would ignore the strong indications that transformation is an essential part of God's plan.

We may take as established the New Testament view of a coming parousia which will conclude the present age. It raises at once two problems. What will happen to those who have already died? And, what will happen to those who are still alive? The answer to the first question will be resurrection and to the second rapture. In both cases the common factor is the need for transformation and this is our next area of discussion.

THE NECESSITY FOR CHANGE IN THE LIGHT OF THE PAROUSIA

In pursuing this theme we shall be mainly concerned with three Pauline passages—1 Corinthians 15:50-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; and Philippians 3:20, 21. In all of these passages Paul has the parousia specifically in mind, and in all of them he mentions the theme of transformation.

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul concentrates on the theme of resurrection, and this reaches a climax in verses 50-58. In the course of the previous discussion Paul has appealed to an agricultural illustration to demonstrate that different seeds will have different bodies, but each will have the body most appropriate to its own type. He also cites the different forms among the heavenly bodies with a view to showing the individuality of each. But his main aim seems to be to show that the believer will receive a spiritual body which will be entirely appropriate to existence in the after-life. To appreciate the importance of the argument for Paul we should note the abhorrence he had for being naked after death and the urgent desire to be properly clothed (2 Corinthians 5). These basic factors must be borne in mind when considering his transformation theme.

Paul introduces as mystery the fact that we shall not all sleep, but shall all be changed.¹⁴ When he uses the word 'mystery' (*mysterion*) he always means a truth which has been previously obscured, but has now been revealed. He clearly wants all his readers to know and regards the content of his communication as a source of great encouragement to them.

From the whole passage we can deduce certain important features.

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¹³ cf. C. F. D. Moule, 'A neglected factor in Johannine Eschatology', *Studies in John presented to Dr. J. N. Sevenster* (ed. W. C. van Unnik et al., Leiden 1970) 155ff.

¹⁴ On the word 'mystery', H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Eng. trans. J. W. Leitch, Philadelphia 1975) 290, says this means both mystery and its unveiling.

1. *Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*

Paul is looking forward to the consummation of the kingdom in the future and in the light of verse 51 it is certainly linked to the parousia. 'Flesh' and 'blood' do not here indicate sinful flesh, but present mortal life.¹⁵ This means that a change from flesh and blood must take place. There is no question here of the resuscitation of dead corpses. Paul is thinking of spiritual beings inheriting the kingdom of heaven.

2. *We shall not all sleep*

This is undoubtedly the best translation of the text here, although grammatically it could be understood as if it meant 'none shall sleep', a clearly untrue statement.¹⁶ Paul looks ahead to an event which will halt death. He uses the metaphor of sleep to denote death in accordance with contemporary usage. It need not imply non-consciousness. What Paul is in fact saying is that though there will be some who do not taste death, all must be changed, whether living or dead.

3. *The change which occurs to the living will be instantaneous*

Paul uses three expressions—'moment', 'twinkling of an eye' and 'sounding of the last trumpet' to show that he is not thinking of a gradual change. The 'moment' is a particular point in history, i.e. the moment of the parousia. Paul does not appear to draw any distinction between the raising of the dead, the transformation of the living and the last trumpet.¹⁷ He does not discuss the question of the intermediate state.

4. *Paul recognizes that the parousia means the death of death*

For this reason he sounds the note of victory. The 'perishable' and the 'mortal' are transformed into the imperishable and the immortal. It is no wonder that Paul rejoices over such a hope as this—everything which hampers will be instantaneously removed.

We would have liked him to tell us what form the immortal will have, but although he does not do so, the context supplies some hints.

1. *Thessalonians 4:13-18*

This passage deals with a rather different problem from 1 Corinthians 15. We have seen that the latter is concerned about those who are alive at the parousia and carries the assurance that these people will be associated with the raised dead at the parousia. In 1 Thessalonians 4 the concern is whether those who have died will have any disadvantage at the parousia. We may note a series of concepts which are deducible from this passage.¹⁸

¹⁵ J. Jeremias *JTS* 2 (1956) 151-159, discusses in detail the meaning of this phrase and concludes that the combination of the two words excludes the application to the dead.

¹⁶ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of the New Testament* (Cambridge 1953) 168, argues that the true meaning here is not 'not all (of us) shall sleep', thus rejecting the view that 'none shall sleep'. On the textual problem here, see C. K. Barrett, *1 Corinthians* (London 1971) 380-381.

¹⁷ It should be noted that the idea of a last trumpet is very familiar in apocalyptic literature. Cf. F. F. Bruce's note on this, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (London 1971) 155.

¹⁸ Some discussion has developed over the meaning of the 'word of the Lord', which Paul claims to have received as the basis of his teaching in this passage. Cf. E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London 1972) 189-190, for a survey of the possibilities. The parallels with Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic apocalypse are sufficiently striking for it to be supposed that Paul had some knowledge of that teaching. This seems preferable to the view that it was a visionary experience. Cf. also A. L. Moore, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (London 1969) 69, who, having set out the various possibilities, is non-committal. Some scholars have considered that the dead in v.14 are martyrs, but this view must be rejected as imposing a too narrow interpretation, which is against the context (cf. D. E. H. Whiteley, *Thessalonians* (Oxford 1969) 70).

1. Paul assumes without debate that the dead will rise

This had not become an issue with the Thessalonians. We may assume that Paul had already impressed on them the certainty of the resurrection.

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It was the connection between the resurrection and the parousia which confused them.

2. Paul concentrates on the rapture

This is rather more specific than the 1 Corinthians 15 passage, since it focuses on the event immediately connected with the parousia. If there is to be a 'catching up' the question of the resurrection body and the transformation of the living is raised in an acute form.¹⁹ It is noticeable that Paul does not here mention change, but since he is arguing against any discrimination between the resurrected dead and the living he must have had in mind a transformation. In short, both must be 'clothed' in the same form.

3. The change will be instantaneous

Again the trumpet call is mentioned, backed by an archangel's voice. All that Paul says on timing is that the resurrection precedes the rapture, but whether he intends by this a time interval is highly doubtful. His purpose in this passage is to reassure the Thessalonians that their believing dead would be at no disadvantage.

4. Both living and dead will be 'with the Lord in the air'

This will result in being eternally with the Lord.²⁰ It is significant that again Paul speaks of death in terms of sleep. In his teaching here he is particularly contrasting the Christian position with those who have no hope. He clearly recognizes the rising and the catching up as a tremendous encouragement for all Christians whether dead or living. It makes death, therefore, irrelevant.

Philippians 3:20, 21

In this third passage Paul again links the parousia with some kind of change. The context here is of great importance. Paul has been writing about the 'earthiness' of those whom he describes as 'enemies of the cross'. In contrast he thinks of Christians as citizens in a heavenly, not an earthly sense. In fact, he has used a concept which would have been of great significance for the Philippians who enjoyed the privileges of a Roman colony. It is in this context that Paul pictures the expectancy of the Christian community waiting for the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Present life is seen to be in an alien environment

There is a future hope which involves a radical change in our present state. This theme links with other New Testament evidence which treats this life as alien territory (1 Peter 2:11; Hebrews 11:13ff.). It is only in view of the certainty of transformation that this alien concept escapes the charge of being a pie-in-the-sky philosophy. If future transformation is an

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¹⁹ The meaning of the verb in v.17 is to carry off by force (cf. Grimm-Thayer). But L. Morris *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (London 1956) 88, sees in the verb not only 'force' but 'suddenness'.

²⁰ E. Best, *Thessalonians* 199, discusses whether the idea of 'meeting with the Lord' carries any overtones of the Hellenistic practice of visiting dignitaries being met outside the city in order to be escorted into it. He concludes that the word used was not chosen for this kind of connection.

inherent part of man's destiny, it must be a dominant factor in our approach to present experience. We live this life as citizens of heaven.²¹

2. There is power available to effect a change

At the heart of Paul's conviction is the certainty that God has everything in his power and therefore he sees no difficulty in a transformation being made.²²

3. The transformation is necessary because of the lowly state of our present bodies

Our bodies of humiliation are wholly inappropriate for a meeting with the Lord. The change will presumably take place instantaneously, although this is implied rather than stated. It will be seen that the common thread running through all these passages is the indispensable nature of transformation. It is significant that these passages are representative of various stages in Paul's life and therefore present a settled conviction. They do not support the view that Paul changed his mind. There is still one more line of enquiry needed to show the full relevance of this to the New Testament doctrine of immortality. We need to discuss the nature of the transformation, or to put it another way, the nature of the resurrection body.

Before doing this it is advisable to point out another Pauline passage, which although making no direct mention of the parousia, supplies a further reason for transformation. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul is concerned to show that the after-life state cannot be described as 'naked'.²³ Indeed he shows an abhorrence of the idea of nakedness, by which he presumably means a state of bodiless spiritual existence.

THE NATURE OF THE TRANSFORMATION

It is when we enter into the discussion of the nature of the change that we are at once faced with speculation. We would like to know more than is revealed. Yet what is revealed furnishes, when carefully examined, sufficient data to allow us to enumerate some general principles. It is this discussion which will supply most encouragement to Christians in the face of death.

1. We may confidently affirm that the transformation will be an improvement. In view of the present state of mankind, it would offer encouragement only if it were demonstrable that existing limitations and weakness would be removed and a more glorious level of existence developed. The certainty that the change will be for the better and not for the worse is guaranteed by the fact that it is God who does the transforming and that he does it on the glorious occasion of the parousia. It is inconceivable that God would wish any of his people to appear with his Son in unworthy or shabby apparel.

²¹ F. W. Beare, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians* (London 1973) 137, cites from the *Epistle to Diognetus* the following passage—'Christians... inhabit the lands of their birth, but as temporary residents thereof; they take their share of responsibilities as citizens, and endure all disabilities as aliens. Every foreign land is native to them, and every native land, foreign territory... They pass their days upon earth, but they hold citizenship in heaven.' For a similar suggestion with regard to 1 Peter, cf. J. H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (London 1981).

²² R. P. Martin, *Philippians* (London 1959) 149, thinks this closing section looks like a liturgy. Whether this is so or not, the emphasis on 'power' here is an integral part of Paul's whole theological position.

F. W. Beare, *Philippians* 138, rightly points out that the transformation is not conceived as happening at death, but at the final triumph of Christ. What is in mind is more than the escape of the soul (as in Greek thought), since the body is specifically mentioned as due for transformation.

²³ Cf. E. E. Ellis, 'The structure of Pauline Eschatology' in *Paul and his Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids 1968) 43ff.

2. The descriptions of change are, however, very general and supply

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little information about the precise nature of the resurrection body. All that we can say with any certainty is that there is some correlation between the believer's resurrection body and the body of Christ. This is particularly seen when we consider the descriptive words which Paul uses.

3. Of the statements about the transformation to take place, we note the following features. Immortality displaces mortality. We have already noted that Paul does not follow the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul. This view saw the body as a severe restriction. Indeed it was regarded as a prison house from which death served as an escape. There was no place for transformation, for an inherently immortal soul, once freed from the body, needed no further change. But Paul speaks of the Christian who dies as receiving immortality at the parousia. The second component of this change is imperishability. There is little real difference from the first component, but the emphasis falls rather on the unchangeable character of the resurrection body. Certainly it will be out of the reach of decay and deterioration. This quality is particularly challenging to death, which depends for its power on its destructive properties. The third feature fills in much more detail. It is transformation into the likeness of Christ. This comes out explicitly in Philippians 3:21, where the change into a body like his glorious body is forecast. It is also undeniable in 2 Corinthians 3:18, where change into Christ's likeness is mentioned, although not in direct consideration of the resurrection body, nor of the parousia. It is otherwise in 1 John 3:2, where believers are promised that they will be like Christ when he appears. This theme of conformity with Christ is seen as a kind of reflection of Christ himself in the believer. John explains that it will happen when believers see him as he is.

If the resurrection body of Jesus is the pattern for our own, we are assured of perfect bodies which are completely appropriate for continuous worship and service in the presence of God. Such a view is supported by Paul's concept of Christ as the firstfruits (1 Corinthians 15:23), who will be followed by those who are his at his coming.²⁴ There is no doubt that the final glorious event in world history will see Christ surrounded by the glorified believers, both dead and living, with no distinction between them.

We have left until last one pressing problem raised by New Testament teaching on the parousia. How can we reconcile Paul's belief that at death believers will be with Christ and his view that it is not until the parousia that the believing dead will be raised? The traditional method of reconciliation is to posit an intermediate state, which describes the state of the departed between death and the parousia. Paul himself gives little information about how he explained the state of believers immediately after death, but he is convinced that they are at once 'with Christ'. Space will not permit us to enter into a discussion on this point, but suffice it to say that it may well be that the problem rests mainly in a confusion between time and eternity.

²⁴ Cf. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 270, who considers that *aparache* designates not only temporal but inherent precedence.

[p.49]

Conclusion

Has this teaching any effective encouragement to offer as we face up to the reality of death? We are certainly presented with an amazing prospect. We are all to witness the winding up of history. We are to be present at the demise of death. We may even not pass through the valley of the shadow, but if we do we are faced with a glorious and eternal change. Whether we live or die our destiny is to share a body which will be as beautiful and resplendent as the risen body of Jesus Christ. No wonder we can now challenge death as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 15:55—'O death where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting?'

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Prepared for the Web in January 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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